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ABSTRACT

Explored is the potential of women's centers and women's centers working together with women's studies programs to bring about meaningful changes in the form and content of women's higher education. Factors that inhibit the realization of this potential are addressed, and suggestions are offered on how these factors might be diminished and the effectiveness of women's centers increased. Ways in which the Women's Educational Equity Project at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst can assist women's centers in becoming more effective are reported. Only campus-based centers are considered, and programs from the University of Massachusetts/Amherst are used as illustrations. (MSE)

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CAMPUS BASED WOMEN'S CENTERS

A Paper Prepared for the
National Women's Studies Association Convention
San Francisco, January, 1977

by Kathryn Girard

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The central purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of women's centers and of women's centers working together with women's studies programs to bring about meaningful changes in the form and content of women's higher education. A secondary purpose is to examine the factors that inhibit the realization of this potential. Finally, the paper suggests how these factors might be diminished and the effectiveness of women's centers increased. The paper develops, then, by responding to four questions:

1. What is the potential of women's centers to bring about changes in women's higher education?
2. How can women's centers, functioning effectively, benefit women's studies programs?
3. What prevents women's centers from functioning effectively?
4. How can the Women's Educational Equity Project at UMass/Amherst assist women's centers in becoming more effective?

The term women's centers as used in this paper refers only to campus-based centers. Also, while a wide range of groups and places are called women's centers, the term here means an organization which meets the following criteria: 1) They call themselves a women's center; 2) They have their own space; 3) There is an identifiable group of people who organize and conduct activities through the center; 4) The group has an identity separate from other campus programs and separate from specific individuals; and 5) The organization has the willingness (if not the current capacity) to respond to a wide variety of women's needs.

Programs from the University of Massachusetts/Amherst will be used to illustrate some ideas of women's centers potential, women's center-women's studies collaboration, and strategies for increasing the effectiveness of women's centers.

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WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL OF WOMEN'S CENTERS?

A 1974 Ford Foundation funded study by Judy Bertlesen of Mills College provides information on 86 women's centers (40% of all the identified women's centers as of 1974).[1] The study cites two characteristics of these centers which directly affect women's higher education. First, they provide direct services to supplant existing biased services or to meet needs where services are nonexistent. Bertlesen's report reveals some uniformity in services identified as necessary and actually offered by centers despite differences in available resources. She found that 87% maintain a library of women's literature, 80% provide speakers on women's issues, 71% organize consciousness-raising groups, 59% offer non-credit workshops, 43% offer credit courses or plan women's studies courses, and 17% provide child care.[2]

Second, women's centers were found to reach a population more diverse than that served by traditional college/university services. The study states that "college women's centers tend to appeal to a wider range of women than traditional age students. More than many campus services, women's centers often attempt to bridge the gaps that separate women -- gaps such as traditional student-faculty, faculty-staff, young-old splits as well as life style, class and racial or ethnic splits."[3] Many women's centers are able to reach out not only to different groups on campus, but also to women in the community for whom the college/university has not been a resource.

To bring about institutional change as well as to provide effective direct services, it is necessary to bring together and respond to the needs of these diverse groups. Centers which see themselves as broadly concerned with women's needs, feminism or sexism are most likely to define as being within their purview all aspects of the university experience -- admissions, financial aid, personnel, housing, course content, promotion and tenure policies and practices, health services, academic programming, etc. Their overview of the college/university allows them to take responsibility for advocacy or program creation wherever the needs of women seem most critical or the issue appears central to the exposure or understanding of institu-

tionalized sexism. Women's centers which take on such a role are able to act as central places where needs identified by diverse populations can be expressed, where solutions can be explored and where resources from within many departments can be drawn upon. Problems need not be fragmented because of limited departmental responsibilities or resources. Instead, issues can be responded to with an awareness of the complexity of the whole. This cross-departmental position is the potential and sometimes actual vantage point of all college/university women's centers.

Everywoman's Center (EWC) at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst is one center that has attempted to create and maintain this cross-departmental position. EWC is a large and moderately funded center (University budget between $70,000 and $80,000) which has been in existence for over 4 years. Bertlesen concluded that EWC was one of four centers nationwide that could "serve as a model, both in terms of its programming and in having a stable, complex, non-traditional organizational structure." Her study termed EWC one of "the great successes."[4] While EWC's staff would usually be more restrained in assessing their accomplishments, a look at EWC's programs is useful in illustrating some of the possibilities of the cross-departmental position described above.

The Center supports a wide range of direct service and advocacy programs. Among these are: The Poor Women's Task Force, a group of poor and welfare women, most of whom are single parents, who have negotiated their own and other poor women's admission into the University; a Resource and Referral Program which responds to over 7,000 requests fro legal, medical, educational, housing and child care information each year; Staff Women's Services, a program for women employees in the non-professional, classified system, which maintains an active liaison with the unions and the University raising issues regarding job upgrading, responsibilities and descriptions, etc.; Project Self, a series of workshops which serve the dual purpose of supplementing the existing University curriculum by offering credit and non-credit workshops in content areas ignored by the University and of providing, especially for women, a vehicle for learning previously denied skills or for gradually entering/re-entering higher educa-

tion. Personal and group counseling, Lesbian counseling, rape advocacy and counseling, a newsletter, career counseling, discrimination advocacy and counseling, a library and drop-in center are also part of the activities of EWC.

The advocacy efforts of various components of the Center, acting alone or in collaboration with other University groups, have promoted and achieved: A change in policy regarding part-time student admissions, so that now it is an option for women wishing to enter/re-enter the Unviersity to do so on a part-time basis; the development of a Women's Studies Program; the creation of a Rape Task Force involving police, health services staff, counseling staff and EWC staff; the establishment of a position in the Financial Aid Office which had as its special concern providing for the financial aid needs of poor people; the development and sponsoring of special sections of required rhetoric courses for older women returning to or entering higher education; a preliminary investigation by the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office of the laws, precedents and agencies bearing on possible discrimination in the State's classified personnel system.

Through the development of both advocacy and direct service programs, EWC has demonstrated its capacity to recognize and respond to many of the varied needs of women in the University and local community. Widespread recognition of this work has resulted in requests from over 300 institutions of higher education in the last two years for information on what EWC does and how.

HOW CAN AN EFFECTIVELY FUNCTIONING WOMEN'S CENTER BENEFIT WOMEN'S STUDIES?

One major way in which women's centers can contribute to women's studies is by advocating and working for the creation of women's studies programs. Since a women's center's mandate may encompass everything from providing personal counseling to monitoring the campus-wide hiring policies and practices to offering courses, supporting the development of a women's studies program seems an appropriate activity for a women's center to undertake. This does not mean that the women's center should then be the primary force in shaping women's studies programs, or that the women's studies program should be seen as a program within the women's center. It may mean

that women's center staff may be able to assist, with time and physical resources as well as ideas, a collaborative group of interested faculty, students, staff and community women. Our experience at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst provides an example of this pattern of a women's center, already established and functioning strongly, collaborating with other groups on campus to form a women's studies program. Because the experience has been satisfying and productive all along and because both programs have developed in tandem, though separately over the past few years, it seems important to share, briefly, how EWC has been able to benefit the Women's Studies Program and how Women's Studies, in turn, has complemented EWC's programs.

In the Fall of 1973, a core group of women faculty, administrators, students and EWC and professional staff got together to work out a proposal for a Women's Studies Program. EWC was able to release one staff woman from her prior work commitments so that she could undertake some of the ongoing development and coordination work that is difficult to maintain when everyone is working at a full-time job elsewhere. EWC was also able to provide a space to meet in and to cover such costs as the printing of the proposal. Other members contributed materials from their respective offices and departments as they could, depending on departmental budgets, attitudes and security.

The beginnings of the Women's Studies Program reflected a relationship to EWC characterized by both closeness and separateness. This still characterizes the relationship. Everywoman's Center has a representative on the Women's Studies Policy Board. Women's Studies provides credit for workshops offered through Everywoman's Center. EWC provides internships for Women's Studies students. Women's Studies and EWC have separate offices and staff but are housed next to one another in the same building. This allows each organization its own focus, priorities, staff, University contacts, and perhaps most importantly, distinct visibility. It also allows for easy and mutual sharing of information and for reflection on how and when to collaborate on projects, cooperate in sponsoring events and/or conspire against the University

bureaucracy. It is not assumed that the two organizations should work together on everything. It is assumed that each organization benefits from the work of the other.

A second benefit to women's studies programs is related to this type of relationship. Women's centers are able to meet different needs of the same audience addressed by women's studies. EWC, for example, provides personal and career counseling, advocacy for financial aid, referrals to legal, educational, medical, housing and child care services--services which are requested and needed by UMass Women's Studies students. The Women's Studies staff, then, is free to devote their energy to developing and gaining support for their academic programs. It seems important that women's studies programs not end up having to split too few people and dollar resources among all the programs that women are likely to need while at the same time having to establish their credibility and viability amidst the suspicion of traditional academic departments. Instead, working in complementary ways, women's centers and women's studies are able to provide a more comprehensive and varied set of responses to the needs of university/college and community women.

A third benefit has to do with women's centers being able to take more risks. Again, to use the UMass/Amherst experiences, the Women's Studies Program has to go through a review by the University's Academic Matters Committee which has established a set of standards for approving new academic programs. Women's Studies, to continue to develop, must find a fine balance between creating their own standards and criteria for evaluation and meeting the expectations and standards of Universtiy faculty, many of whom may be predisposed to rejecting the viability and worth of a women's studies program--<u>any</u> women's studies program. Everywoman's Center, on the other hand, has always been seen as an anomaly and no one has ever quite known by what measures to assess its merit. Since EWC has different funding and accountability relationships to different areas of the University, there is no one body that accepts or rejects its programs. EWC continually evaluates its programs and submits reports, but on a very different basis than an external, terminial, academic review. So, for example, EWC is able to create programs and to provide resources aimed at various groups of

community (non-university) women, and to create a rationale for doing so. Women's Studies could not so easily justify (to sectors of the University who have a voice in approving their program) providing courses for non-university women.

Women's studies programs, however, are more likely to address the interests and needs of women students and faculty who wish to develop feminist pedagogy, conduct new research or create new courses to explore traditional disciplines and methodologies from a feminist perspective. This benefits faculty and students directly and women's centers indirectly. Women's studies programs are able to focus on the academic interests and needs of feminist faculty and students in a more in-depth and comprehensive manner than would a women's center. Women's studies also enable feminist faculty and students to find and build the support networks so essential to continuing their work. This network is then available to the women's center when the need arises for information, advocacy, sponsors or other support, just as the network of groups involved in women's center programs serve as a resource for women's studies.

WHAT PREVENTS WOMEN'S CENTERS FROM FUNCTIONING EFFECTIVELY?

While women's centers have the potential to address the needs of a wide range of women and could thus make a valuable contribution in the struggle for educational equity generally and the creation of women's studies programs specifically, three ongoing problems seem to inhibit their effectiveness: 1) the lack of information on the resources, experiences, accomplishments and strategies of successful centers; 2) a lack of experience in program and organizational development; and 3) insufficient funding to conduct programs.

Many writiers and groups have noted the problem in the Women's Movement of duplication of programs without the benefit of knowing what others have done, and hopefully, been successful at or what others have learned from varying approaches to similar problems. Experiences at EWC have also confirmed this problem. During the last two years, one hundred and nine college or university-based women's centers have written requesting information on EWC as a model of a multi-program center. They asked questions about EWC's organizational structure, funding, accomplishments and failures. They

also raised questions on negotiating with administrators and on a range of other issues encountered in their efforts to establish a center at their institutions. In addition, women's centers from one hundred and ninety-one colleges have written requesting information on specific EWC programs or special projects. Again, the requests are for information on how programs are planned, supported and administered. These letters often directly speak of the writers' inexperience in higher education, in program planning and in creating alternative organizations.

The third factor inhibiting these centers' more effective contribution to educational equity, women's needs and women's studies has been the difficulty experienced in getting and maintaining funding from their institutions. The Bertlesen study found that of the women's centers responding, only 11% had stable line item budgets totaling more than $10,000. Forty-one percent of the centers were dependent on "temporary college budget allotments, student government grants, women's center projects, or small donations and fees" totaling less than $10,000.[5]

It seems apparent that if women's centers within higher education are to play an active and vital role in increasing women's opportunities and changing the institutions to be more responsive to women's needs, then specific actions need to be taken to assure that those involved in such endeavors benefit form the experiences and skills of others in developing programs, creating alternative organizations and obtaining funding.

HOW THE WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL EQUITY PROJECT AT UMASS /AMHERST ADDRESSES THESE NEEDS.

In response to these needs, two women from Everywoman's Center developed a proposal for a project aimed at achieving the following program objectives: 1) To create and validate a training program that utilizes the combined expertise of women's center staff and University administrators and faculty; 2) To create and validate a training model that other centers could utilize in providing help to centers in their regions. 3) To train women's centers' staff in program development and securing budget support; 4) To develop printed materials for national dissemination, based on the training content and competency areas.

Funding received for fiscal year 1977 will support the traininging of staffs of New England centers. The training is designed to enable participants to:

-- determine sources of support and sources of resistance to the establishment of desired women's centers' programs which would promote educational equity;

-- develop strategies to increase the support for and minimize the resistance to programs which would foster educational equity;

-- develop or increase program development skills;

-- explore leadership styles and issues as to the effectiveness of styles in various settings;

-- develop/increase skills in effectively communicating with college/university administrators with decision-making authority;

-- increase frequency of collaboration among faculty, administrators, students, and women's centers' staff in working on problems of educational equity;

-- increase effectiveness in developing budget requests and negotiating the college/university budget process.

To meet these objectives, participants from college/university based women's centers in New England will come to the University of Massachusetts/Amherst campus for a week of intensive training. As part of their training, staffs from women's centers will be developing a program proposal and presenting it to a University administrator with the request that it be funded. In the context of these simulations, women will be able to test out different approaches to use with administrators at their home institution. Administrators from UMass/Amherst have also agreed to conduct a seminar on how they make decisions, what influences them -- polititcs vs. ideas, what constraints operate in different situations, what they see as their responsibilities, etc.

Participants will also examine their previous experiences with collaboration among campus groups and analyze case studies of other groups' experiences in an attempt to clarify the components of effective collaboration. Overall, case studies, role plays, simulations and other exercises will be used along with lectures, discussions and seminars to balance the activities of the training. In this way we hope to provide participants with the opportunity to both think about and act on issues in new ways.

A second year of the project is being developed and will aim at: 1) training

selected women's centers' staff in each of the Federal Regions in the implementation of the training model; 2) making training for women's centers' staff available in each of the Federal Regions; 3) providing printed materials on the training curriculum; and 4) nationally disseminating information on the project and training.

In order to pursue ideas for the second year the Project is interested in identifying established women's centers who have good relationships with faculty and administrators on their campuses who would be interested in being trained to provide the training to other centers (given that someone from each center would receive some compensation to coordinate this training). Any centers interested in this should contact the Women's Educational Equity Project (W.E.E.P.).

W.E.E.P. (a somewhat unfortunate acronym unless one is reminded of the song, ".. weep no more my ladies...") is also compiling an annotated bibliography of the available literature on women's centers. If you know of articles (published or unpublished but available from the author), research studies, dissertations, pamphlets or books that should be included, contact W.E.E.P. by the end of February.

Finally, the Project has conducted an extensive needs survey of campus-based women's centers. Data should be analyzed and summarized by the end of March. Anyone wishing information on the findings can contact the Project after March. The address for the Project is:

Women's Educational Equity Project
114 Draper Hall
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts 01003

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1. Bertlesen, Judy, "Two Studies of Women in Higher Education," Mills College, Oakland, California, May, 1974.
2. Ibid., pp. 35-38.
3. Ibid., p. 40.
4. Ibid., p. 60.
5. Ibid., p. 33.